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Citizen Hughes

Papers reveal an obsession to buy power

By Paul Galloway

There was a moment, Michael Drosnin said, after he had been immersed for months in his research, that he didn't want to write his book about Howard Hughes.

Despite what he was finding in Hughes' private papers and the effect he was confident his book would have, a part of him suddenly was arguing that everything he had discovered should remain a secret, that only he should ever know the whole story.

"It's hard to explain, but it was as though he had a hold on me," Drosnin said. "He had taken me over. I had become obsessed with Howard Hughes. I had all this incredible information, and yet I found myself wanting to keep everything to myself. I was becoming as secretive and crazy as he was."

"I had gotten too close. I had to step back for a few days and get my bearings. The writing finally became cathartic. It was a way to escape."

The story says something about the risks a writer takes in becoming totally absorbed in his subject, and it may say even more about the curious power wielded by Howard Hughes, which, for Drosnin, could be as real in death as it had been while he was alive.

Drosnin, 38, is a former reporter for the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal. He was a 30-year-old freelancer when, in 1977, he came into possession of the secret records of Howard Hughes, who had died a year earlier. The papers, including more than 3,000 of Hughes' handwritten memos, had been stolen from the Hughes headquarters in Los Angeles in 1974 and never recovered, despite a



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number of ostensibly intensive investigations.

For more than seven years, Drosnin spent almost every waking hour with the legacy of Howard Hughes and the spoils of his vast bribery, poring over his lode of notes, interviewing hundreds of people about him, examining thousands of documents related to him and his activities.

"It was like living with him," Drosnin said. "And in spite of his corruption and his bigotry and his insanity, I tend to like Howard Hughes."

"Again, it's something that's hard to explain. For one thing, he was a great coauthor, a great natural writer. He was mad as a hatter

but also something of a genius. He wrote lucid, forceful memos, and he was so innocent of his own evil. He was in so much pain and terror, he could see nothing but his own fears."

The result is "Citizen Hughes" [Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$18.95], which is high on the best-seller lists. The Tribune and other newspapers have given it generally excellent reviews, it has been the subject of many television reports and articles, and the authenticity of its basic source material—the Hughes memos—has not been challenged.

The book is a detailed study of a man of monumental wealth and unparalleled, paranoiac eccentricity who, while keeping himself invisible to all but a handful of dutiful aides, exerted enormous influence at the highest levels of government.

Hughes earned his influence the old-fashioned way: He bought it.

His abundant financial support was calculatedly bipartisan and awesomely effective. Drosnin's roll call of Hughes beneficiaries starts at the top with Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, who always gave his entreaties respectful attention and often action, and includes Lawrence O'Brien, who was on the Hughes payroll at \$15,000 a month while he was chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and Republican Sen. Paul Laxalt, whose family law firm received at least \$180,000 from Hughes while Laxalt was governor of Nevada.

"The power of great wealth is extraordinary," Drosnin said. "Hughes believed the government was for sale, and to a great degree he was right. His money got him

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